

Character Class

Dread Necromancer, Death Magician

By Skip Williams



A dread necromancer (from *Heroes of Horror*) literally deals death through spells and a host of class powers. A dread necromancer's fascination with death and the undead can make him an unpleasant companion at the best of times, and a group of good-hearted characters will find his presence intolerable. For groups that aren't too squeamish, however, a dread necromancer and his death dealing power can be valuable.



Assets

When you choose a dread necromancer for your character, you gain access to a short list of deadly spells and an impressive collection of equally deadly class features. A dread necromancer can seem one dimensional, but a little creativity during play allows him to defeat many kinds of challenges. Here's an overview of the things you have going for you when you choose a dread necromancer.

- **Winning Ways:** A dread necromancer needs a high Charisma score to make his spells as strong as possible. This gives the character considerable personal appeal despite his penchant for dead things. A dread necromancer can be a smooth talker when necessary.
- **Good Will Saves:** A dread necromancer uses the best progression for Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This helps the dread necromancer resist most effects that attack or fool his mind or assault his spirit, such as charms, compulsions, illusions, fear, and even *inflict wounds* spells.

- **Spells:** A dread necromancer can cast arcane spells from a short list of class spells. Most of these kill or injure living creatures. A few grant some degree of control over the undead or create other useful effects. The advanced learning class feature allows you to add a few spells to your spell list.

As a dread necromancer, you don't have a spellbook. Instead, the entire class spell list serves as a personal repertoire of spells that you have ready to cast almost all the time. You have a daily limit on the number of spells you can cast, but you can freely cast any spell you know until you reach your limit. If you need to cast a particular dread necromancer spell several times in a day, you can do so without having to guess which spells to prepare ahead of time.

- **Fair Weapon Selection:** The dread necromancer is proficient with all simple weaponry and a single martial weapon chosen at 1st level. Access to the whole simple weapons category doesn't make you a fighting machine, but it gives you plenty of options should your spells fail you. Your choice of a single martial weapon lets you augment your weapon selection with one particularly effective weapon.
- **Fair Armor Selection:** The dread necromancer is proficient with light armor and no shields. Light armor doesn't provide much protection, but it's better than what many spell wielders have available (especially arcane casters). A dread necromancer wearing light armor doesn't suffer an arcane spell failure chance when casting his dread necromancer spells.
- **Charnel Touch:** Beginning at 1st level, a dread necromancer can use negative energy to damage living creatures or heal undead creatures by touch. This power works only once a round, but the dread necromancer otherwise can use it as often as he likes. The dread necromancer can use a *spectral hand* spell to use this power from a distance.
- **Rebuke Undead:** Also beginning at 1st level, a dread necromancer can channel negative energy to rebuke or bolster undead. This power works just like the cleric ability (except that a dread necromancer with a neutral alignment cannot choose to turn undead instead of rebuking them). This power can prove useful for controlling and supporting undead allies the dread necromancer collects or summons.
- **Lich Body:** Starting at 2nd level, a dread necromancer slowly begins turning into an undead creature and gains DR 2/bludgeoning and magic. The DR value increased to 4 at 7th level, 6 at 11th level, and 8 at 15th level.
- **Negative Energy Burst:** Beginning at 3rd level, this character can release negative energy in a 5-foot-radius burst centered on himself. The power works once a day at 3rd level and one additional time per day for every five dread necromancer levels beyond 3rd. The negative energy damages living creatures and heals undead creatures.
- **Advanced Learning:** At 4th level, a dread necromancer can select a necromancy spell from the cleric or wizard class spell list of a level equal to or less than the highest level dread necromancer spell he can cast and add it to his personal spell list. The dread necromancer can learn an additional new spell every four dread necromancer levels beyond 4th level.
- **Mental Bastion:** Also at 4th level, a dread necromancer gains a +2 bonus on all saving throws to resist sleep magic, stunning, paralysis, poison, or disease. At 14th level, the bonus increases to +4.
- **Fear Aura:** At 5th level, a dread necromancer can radiate fear in a 5-foot radius, centered on himself, as a free action. Affected creatures become shaken.
- **Scabrous Touch:** Starting at 6th level, a dread necromancer can use his charnel touch power to inflict a

victim with a disease. The power works once a day at 6th level and one additional time per day for every five dread necromancer levels beyond 6th.

- **Familiar:** When a dread necromancer reaches 7th level in the class, he can obtain a powerful familiar from a short list of creatures. With a few exceptions noted in the class description, this familiar works just like a sorcerer's or wizard's familiar. In addition, the familiar can use its ability to deliver touch spells to deliver the dread necromancer's charnel, scabrous, or enervating touch attacks (see below).
- **Undead Mastery:** At 8th level, a dread necromancer becomes able to create more powerful undead than normal. The dread necromancer also can control extra undead when using the *animate dead* spell.
- **Negative Energy Resistance:** At 9th level, a dread necromancer gains a +4 bonus on saving throws against negative energy effects.
- **Fortification:** Starting at 10th level, a dread necromancer has a 25% resistance to critical hits. At 17th level, this increases to 50%.
- **Enervating Touch:** At 12th level, a dread necromancer can bestow negative levels through his charnel touch attack. Each day, the dread necromancer can bestow a number of negative levels equal to one half his class level but no more than two negative levels with a single touch attack.
- **Craft Wondrous Item:** A dread necromancer gains the Craft Wondrous Item feat as a bonus feat.
- **Lich Transformation:** A dread necromancer becomes a lich upon reaching 20th level. The dread necromancer doesn't need to spend any gold or XP for his phylactery.

Weaknesses

Dread necromancers pay a price for their spells and powerful class features. Here are the drawbacks you should consider when thinking about a dread necromancer character.

- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The dread necromancer gains only 6-sided hit dice. That gives you a few more hit points that most arcane spellcasters have but still leaves you vulnerable during a battle.
- **Poor Attack Bonus:** A dread necromancer's base attack bonus is +1 per two levels, which is the worst in the game.
- **Poor Reflex and Fortitude Saves:** Dread necromancers have the worst progression for Reflex and Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Dread necromancers aren't good at avoiding attacks against their bodies. The mental bastion and lich transformation class features help ameliorate the weak Fortitude save.
- **Limited Skill Selection:** At a mere two skill points per level, most dread necromancer's don't have many skill ranks, even with quadruple skill points at 1st level.

The dread necromancer class skill list is correspondingly small. It contains a mix of skills that allow the dread necromancer to conceal himself, manipulate others, and delve into the secrets of the dead. It's tough, however, for a single dread necromancer to excel in all these areas.

- **Limited Spell Selection:** The dread necromancer class list doesn't contain many spells, and nearly all of them are oriented toward combat or dealing with undead creatures in some manner. This doesn't pose a

problem every adventure, but the lack of defensive and utilitarian spells limits your options in the long run. The advanced learning class feature allows you to customize your spell list somewhat, but you only get to add five spells to your list throughout your entire career.

- **A Touch of Evil:** A dread necromancer cannot have a good alignment. This could make it difficult to fit the character harmoniously into some groups.

Playing a Classy Dread Necromancer

A dread necromancer can pose a challenge to any player, even the most seasoned. Here a few tips to ease the task.

Get into the Mindset

The best dread necromancers have a fascination with death, death rituals, the undead, or all three. These interests could manifest themselves in several different ways. A player character dread necromancer might collect funerary objects, take extensive notes about funerary customs, size up everyone he meets to determine how well the body might take to animation, question characters about near death experiences, or show other macabre habits. In any case, most characters should find a dread necromancer a little creepy.

Because every dread necromancer is bound for immortality (of a sort) through the lich transformation class feature, dread necromancers also tend to hold themselves aloof from current affairs, except when those might affect their chances for survival or their future prospects.

Mix it Up

You are as capable a spellcaster as anyone else; however, you have a tightly focused spell list and several class features that can prove as effective as spells. On the other hand, your spells generally have longer range and can affect more foes than the attacks you can make using your class features. When you make a move during a battle, keep all your options in mind.

Remember Your Friends

Your negative energy burst and fear aura produce auras or bursts that reach a short distance from your body. These effects can be rough on living allies, so it pays to refrain from using them unless you're surrounded by foes or by undead allies.

It also pays to collect undead allies when you can. Your rebuke undead power can place some undead creatures you encounter under your control. You can use spells to create or summon undead allies.

In any case, you'll wear out your welcome in your party if you don't pay attention to the other adventurers in your group.

The Party's Front Line: Your party's armored types (particularly fighters and paladins) form a fighting line that keeps enemies away from you. Your charnel touch power and attack spells boost your party's ability to deal damage to foes. Your intervention can keep your party's fighting line from being overwhelmed by a sudden attack or an unexpectedly tough opponent. When casting spells, be careful to aim them so your friends aren't caught in their destructive effects.

Party Scouts: These characters often move ahead of the group to check for hidden dangers or root out hidden enemies that you can defeat with your spells and class abilities. Undead allies you collect, create, or summon

often prove quite stealthy, so consider sending a few along for tactical support when your party's scouts forge ahead. Remember that if an enemy makes an unexpected maneuver, these characters might be the only ones who can react quickly enough to protect you. It pays to stay friendly with the party scouts.

Other Spellcasters: You probably aren't the only spellcaster in your party, so don't act as though you are. The range of spells available to you is smaller than what the others have available. Keep allied spellcasters informed about the spells you have available to avoid duplicating spells or effects between you.

Some Key Equipment

Your magical abilities are more important to you than your gear, but a few pieces of the right gear can make your career longer and happier:

- **Armor:** Buy the best light armor you can afford. At the beginning of your career, that usually means studded leather, but move up to a chain shirt or mithral armor as soon as you can. You can use a feat to gain proficiency with medium or heavy armor, but these will slow you down. Also, your spells become subject to your armor's arcane spell failure chance when you wear medium or heavy armor.

You'll never regret having the highest Armor Class you can get, especially if you plan to use your charnel touch and other offensive class features aggressively. Add other defensive items to your armor if possible. Such items might include *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor* when you can afford them. Keep in mind that several lesser items that stack together give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item.

- **Melee Weapon:** Your magic is better than your fighting ability, but you might find yourself in a situation where neither your spells nor your class abilities will prove effective. So, take advantage of your single martial weapon proficiency. Because you are not proficient with any kind of shield, you might as well choose a two-handed martial weapon. A greataxe fits your death-dealing image well and deals a tremendous amount of damage. A scythe also fits your image; it deals less damage than a greataxe but has an impressive critical rating.

If you'd rather use your martial weapon proficiency for a ranged weapon, consider a spear. This deals good damage and can prove useful for probing surfaces for unseen dangers. A long spear has reach and can help keep foes a little farther off.

- **Ranged Weapon:** A crossbow can prove as effective as a low-level spell or even your charnel touch power early in your career. Even when you've gained a few levels, a crossbow is still useful against opponents you cannot affect with spells or negative energy. You can use either a heavy or a light crossbow. The former deals more damage but takes longer to reload.

If you decide to make your single martial weapon a ranged weapon, choose a long bow or composite long bow. These weapons deal good damage and allow you multiple shots if your base attack bonus is high enough.

- **Allies to Order:** An extradimensional space such as a *bag of holding* is handy for storing a collection of skeletons or corpses for a quick *animate dead* spell.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of

the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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